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## Article

# Barriers to Empowerment: Examining the Transition of Pakistani Women from Higher Education (HE) to Professional Life

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**Abstract:** Gender equality is essential for economic and societal advancement, as outlined in the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal 5. This research examines the obstacles that hinder women's progression from higher education to empowerment in Pakistan. Using a comprehensive descriptive survey questionnaire, we collected quantitative data to gain insights from a diverse sample of various provinces. The survey consisted of two sections: background information and 25 constructs of barriers from the existing literature. Data analysis involving 399 respondents included descriptive and inferential statistics, cross-tabulation, and significance testing using non-parametric tests. The findings highlighted significant sociocultural, familial, and professional barriers, with regional disparities underscoring the need for targeted interventions. Women respondents consistently perceived barriers more keenly than men, underscoring the gender-specific nature of these challenges. This study emphasizes the need for focused policies and educational initiatives to address barriers and promote gender equality in Pakistan's higher education and professional spheres.

**Keywords:** Pakistan; gender equality; gender parity; higher education (HE); workplace transition



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## 1. Introduction

With a population of 245 million, Pakistan is the fifth most populated country in the world (Worldometer 2024). However, its most recent literacy rates reported in 2019 for men and women stand at 69.29% and 46.49%, respectively, reflecting a significant gender disparity (Statistica 2024). Reports from a plethora of international agencies further underscore a gender gap. For instance, regarding gender parity in economic participation and opportunity, Pakistan ranks 153rd out of 156 countries globally, scoring 0.369 (World Economic Forum 2021). The Thomson Reuters Foundation (2011) rated Pakistan among the five worst countries for women's education. The Global Gender Gap Report showed Pakistan scored low across all developmental indexes, including female educational attainment, health facility availability, political empowerment, and economic participation and opportunities (Arifeen 2010; Hausmann et al. 2012). Despite ongoing efforts, discrimination against women persists across various sectors of life (UNICEF 2023). Women still only constitute 25% of the labor force (Tanaka and Muzones 2016) and continue to experience low social status compared to men, who dominate positions of power and decision-making. Cultural influences in Pakistan often subject women to discrimination, violence, and restrictive societal norms (Mahata et al. 2023; Abbasi et al. 2019). Pakistani society is highly patriarchal, with gender-based disparities prevalent in health, education, income opportunities, employment opportunities, personal security, control over assets, and participation in politics (Chauhan 2014).

Recent focus has concentrated on addressing the 22.5 million children out of school, of which 32% of primary school-age children are girls compared to 21% of boys (UNICEF 2023), and support and measures of gender progress and success have not ensued beyond tertiary education. Thus, an “upward” bottleneck exists for girls, especially as they get older. The belief that completing higher education (HE) leads to better opportunities does not hold for female graduates, and it is the most neglected sector (Mehmood et al. 2018). Thus, the transition from HE to empowerment represents a critical juncture for Pakistani women. Empowerment, encompassing economic independence, social autonomy, and political participation, is a fundamental human right and catalyzes societal progress and development. However, numerous barriers impede women’s seamless progression along this trajectory, posing significant challenges to gender equality and inclusivity in economic growth.

This study embarks on a comprehensive exploration of the multifaceted barriers that women encounter during their journey from HE to empowerment in Pakistan. A robust research design and a descriptive survey methodology highlight the intricate interplay of sociocultural, familial, and professional factors that shape women’s experiences in the transition phase. Using a questionnaire for data collection ensures the reliability and validity of the findings. By leveraging quantitative data, this study seeks to provide a nuanced understanding of the challenges faced by women across diverse socio-economic backgrounds and geographical locations in Pakistan. In doing so, adopting a purposive sampling technique ensures the inclusion of voices from various regions, enriching the analysis with insights into regional disparities and localized barriers. Through rigorous data analysis techniques, including both descriptive and inferential statistics, this study aims to uncover patterns, trends, and significant differences in the perceived barriers faced by women.

The findings of this study are of utmost importance for policymakers, educators, and practitioners dedicated to advancing gender equality and women’s empowerment in Pakistan. In the era of rapid globalization and economic interdependence, HE is considered a capital investment paramount for socio-economic development. HE institutions have a fundamental role in producing scientists, political leaders, economists, and religious and social scholars, to name a few, who serve society to enrich its values and develop its resources (Mehmood et al. 2018). However, developing countries, including Pakistan, must prioritize HE and support lifelong learning and development. The World Bank Group (2003) reported that such countries will struggle to benefit from the global knowledge-based economy if they do not give sufficient importance to improving HE. By identifying key barriers and their underlying drivers, this research provides a solid foundation for evidence-based policy formulation and targeted interventions. These interventions aim to dismantle barriers and create pathways for women’s full participation and leadership in educational and professional spheres, fostering a more inclusive and equitable society. By examining differences in perceptions between male and female respondents, this study underscores the importance of gender-sensitive approaches in addressing systemic inequalities. In addition, with a nuanced understanding of these obstacles for different groups across Pakistan, targeted interventions can be made to dismantle systemic inequities and foster an enabling environment for women’s advancement. The comprehensive nature of this study ensures that every aspect of these barriers is noticed, providing a reliable and thorough analysis for informed decision-making. The insights from this study are expected to fill a gap in the current understanding of women’s empowerment in Pakistan and provide a basis for future research and action.

## 2. Literature Review

A comprehensive review of the literature reveals that barriers experienced by Pakistani women can be classified into three main categories: cultural, organizational, and individual. Women’s empowerment, grounded in human rights principles, emphasizes the importance of women having control over their own lives and decisions (Leder 2016). This

empowerment is essential for global development, as women make up nearly half of the world's population (Upadhyay et al. 2014).

Cultural barriers play a crucial role in shaping women's professional trajectories by enforcing societal norms, stereotypes, and biases that dictate gender roles and expectations. Women in academic leadership roles encounter numerous challenges (Khokhar 2018; Taj 2016; Yousaf and Schmiede 2017). These barriers are particularly significant in Pakistan, where deeply rooted cultural norms restrict women's autonomy and professional advancement. In Pakistan, societal norms create a complex environment for women in professional and managerial roles, often limiting their autonomy and volition in making career decisions. These norms reflect the restrictive societal expectations prevalent in the country (Afzal 2024).

Women in Pakistani society often experience limited autonomy when making career decisions due to the influence of these social and cultural norms. This lack of autonomy restricts women from pursuing their desired career paths and making independent choices regarding their professional lives (Abbasi et al. 2019; Mumtaz and Salway 2009). Women face gender bias and discrimination at work, resulting in unequal opportunities, lower pay, and limited advancement (Bishu and Headley 2020; Galea et al. 2020; Raza et al. 2023). Sociocultural biases and workplace discrimination undermine women's skills and hinder their success in male-dominated fields (Bridges et al. 2021).

Societal norms and stereotypes heavily impact women's success in the workplace, often overshadowing their professional contributions and affecting their self-confidence and engagement in STEM careers (Sharif et al. 2024a). To further clarify, these norms often perpetuate the belief that women are more suited to domestic responsibilities rather than professional or educational roles. For example, it is common in many regions of Pakistan to view women's primary roles as homemakers, reinforcing the stereotype that women do not need higher education or employment to fulfill their societal duties (Abbasi et al. 2019; Mumtaz and Salway 2009). This is reflected in the lower participation of women in the labor force, which stands at just 25% (Tanaka and Muzones 2016), and in workplace discrimination where women are often excluded from leadership positions (Maheshwari and Nayak 2022). Specifically for Pakistan, social and cultural norms persistently view leadership as masculine, reinforcing stereotypes that undermine women's capability in senior roles (Diehl 2014; Yousaf and Schmiede 2017).

These stereotypes are deeply rooted in the patriarchal structure of society, which often perceives women as primarily responsible for domestic roles rather than as viable candidates for professional or academic pursuits. This bias contributes to the underrepresentation of women in academia, where perceptions of lacking skills and intentional discrimination are prevalent (Maheshwari and Nayak 2022; Yousaf and Schmiede 2017). Additionally, societal stereotypes hinder women's confidence and participation in STEM fields (Sharif et al. 2024b). Whilst these issues relate to Pakistan, they can be found in other countries as well, which share a similar gender stance. These specific stereotypes—such as the notion that women should prioritize family over careers, or that women are not suited for leadership roles—form significant obstacles for women as they transition from higher education to the workplace.

The patriarchal nature of Pakistani society and prevalent gender stereotypes restrict women from acquiring the necessary education, skills, and competencies required for professional and management positions, limiting their career ascendance prospects (Waqar et al. 2021). The research highlighted that workplace attitudes and societal support are crucial for women's career advancement, while legislative measures are less emphasized in promoting gender equality (Sharif et al. 2024a). Women face discrimination at various stages, from recruitment to promotion. Some organizations and employers prefer hiring men due to concerns about women potentially taking maternity leave (Alshdiefat et al. 2024).

Organizational barriers arise from institutional structures, policies, and practices that disadvantage women. These barriers are often embedded in organizational cultures

and can significantly impede women's career progression (Alshdiefat et al. 2024; Shah et al. 2020). Pakistani women encounter significant familial and organizational barriers in their professional journeys, including limited access to professional networks, mentorship opportunities, and gender-biased recruitment and promotion practices (Tahir 2020). The sociocultural influences in Pakistan further exacerbate these challenges (Ahmad and Bhatti 2023), creating an environment where women often struggle to achieve career progression (Roomi et al. 2018). Economic barriers significantly hinder girls' education. In families with low income, boys are often given priority for higher-quality education, as they are perceived as future breadwinners, while girls are not viewed with the same expectation (Rana et al. 2024).

Notably, women and academics in Pakistani universities face challenges balancing research-related activities with family responsibilities, leading to slow career progression. The inability to dedicate sufficient time to research due to familial responsibilities can impede women's advancement in academic careers (Ali et al. 2023). The concept of the glass ceiling, which symbolizes invisible barriers preventing women from advancing in their careers despite their qualifications and achievements, is particularly relevant in understanding the challenges women face in professional life (Purcell et al. 2010). Financial constraints and gender disparities are significant factors affecting female higher education in Pakistan (Ali et al. 2023; Mursaleen and Taimur 2023; Ullah and Skelton 2013; Saher et al. 2023).

The underrepresentation of women in higher academic roles is a persistent issue causing concern (Avin et al. 2015; Cook and Glass 2014; Howe-Walsh and Turnbull 2014; Taylor-Abdulai et al. 2014; Machado-Taylor and Özkanli 2013; Zeng 2011; Montez et al. 2003). In Pakistan, gender bias, social barriers, and inadequate workplace support limit women's career opportunities (Asian Development Bank 2000), while sexual harassment worsens gender inequality (Malatjie and Mbajjorgu 2024; Hadi 2022). Despite extensive research, these challenges continue globally (De Paola and Scoppa 2015; Santos and Dang Van Phu 2019; Yousaf and Schmiede 2017; Cuadrado et al. 2012; Gregory 2003; Lee and Won 2014; Luke 2000; Onsongo 2004). Individual barriers include internalized beliefs, self-doubt, and confidence issues that women may experience, particularly in male-dominated environments. These internal barriers can significantly impact women's ability to navigate professional spaces and achieve career success (Almaki et al. 2016; Giugno 2015).

Women often face greater scrutiny and pressure in professional settings compared to their male counterparts, which can lead to internalized self-doubt and confidence issues (Yasmeen et al. 2022). Despite these challenges, many women in Pakistan demonstrate agency in recognizing entrepreneurial opportunities and making informed career choices (Roomi and Parrott 2008). The impact of workplace stress, interpersonal conflicts, and the disproportionate responsibilities related to domestic work further exacerbate gender disparities in career progression. Balancing work and family roles is a significant challenge for Pakistani women, influenced by Pakistan's unique socio-economic and cultural environment (Rehman and Roomi 2012; Villarroya and Barrios 2022). The expectations placed on women to manage both professional responsibilities and household duties can hinder their career progression and impact their ability to engage in the workforce fully (Hafeez et al. 2021). Gender disparities in education also contribute to women facing discrimination and challenges in accessing higher education (Rana et al. 2024).

In summary, the transition from higher education to professional life has numerous barriers for women, driven by cultural norms, organizational practices, and individual factors. Addressing these challenges requires a multifaceted approach that includes promoting gender equality, improving access to mentorship and professional networks, and challenging societal attitudes that perpetuate gender biases. Understanding and addressing these barriers is crucial for creating a more inclusive environment that supports women's career aspirations and professional growth.



### 3. Method

According to Lorber (2000), gender is a complex issue involving various epistemological perspectives as a social institution and an interactive, iterative concern. As this research emphasizes the need to address gender equality from multiple perspectives to provide a comprehensive view of its barriers, whether they relate to policy, society, the workplace, or individuals, and given the significance of this issue in Pakistan, it was essential to gain a response from a diversity of respondents to ensure informed filtration and evaluation. Therefore, a descriptive quantitative survey was administered to allow for the analysis of a large sample population (Ponto 2015). The survey was meticulously designed to capture detailed responses from participants across various provinces in Pakistan, providing a comprehensive overview of the issues.

This paper employed a quantitative approach to collect and analyze data on the barriers facing women during their transition from higher education to empowerment. This approach allowed us to identify broad patterns, trends, and relationships across a large sample, providing generalizable insights into the systemic issues faced by women in Pakistan. However, we acknowledge that quantitative methods, while useful for identifying statistically significant relationships, can sometimes be overlooked by the depth and complexity of individual experiences. Greater nuance could be achieved by incorporating qualitative methods, such as interviews or focus groups, which would allow for a more detailed exploration of personal narratives and contextual factors influencing women's experiences. However, collecting qualitative data from nearly 400 participants spread throughout the country would have been very difficult.

#### 3.1. Sampling

A purposive sampling technique was employed to ensure the inclusion of respondents from diverse socio-economic backgrounds and educational levels from different regions in Pakistan, ensuring a diverse range of perspectives, including those currently/recently engaged in HE and/or in a professional career. It is important to note that an inclusive approach in gender studies is crucial for fostering a comprehensive understanding of gender dynamics and promoting meaningful progress towards gender equality. It provides valuable insights into how societal norms, cultural expectations, and institutional structures shape their experiences and perceptions of gender roles. In doing so, it enriches the discourse on gender by highlighting the diverse ways in which individuals navigate and interpret these dynamics. Moreover, understanding attitudes and behaviours towards gender issues is essential for developing inclusive policies and interventions that address the needs and challenges faced by all genders. It promotes empathy, collaboration, and solidarity across gender lines, fostering a more equitable and supportive environment for individuals of diverse gender identities. Ultimately, an inclusive approach contributes to dismantling stereotypes, challenging traditional norms, and advancing towards a society where all individuals have equal opportunities and rights, regardless of gender.

The survey was distributed to random samples of Universities in Pakistan and their associated alumni networks. Out of 500 distributed questionnaires, 416 were retrieved, and 399 were deemed suitable for analysis, yielding a response rate of 79.8%.

#### 3.2. Questionnaire Development and Data Collection

A comprehensive literature review was undertaken to compile various potential indicators for exploring HE and employment in Pakistan. These indicators are the foundation for subsequent filtration and assessment in the survey design. The questionnaire was structured into two sections: (1) background information was sought to gather demographic data (including age, gender, education level, employment status, and professional experience); and (2) twenty-five constructs found in the extant literature as barriers facing women during the transition from higher education to empowerment in Pakistan were used against a 5-point Likert scale. The scale ranged from 1, for "strongly disagree", to 5, which represented "strongly agree", with an option for an "unsure" or "non-applicable",

and additional space to expand on responses and share views on other issues not covered in the survey. In addition, there was space for respondents to add additional barriers that were not identified from the literature. Initially, a pilot questionnaire was distributed within the project consortium, which included 4 academics, 3 students, and 1 industry contact. The pilot aimed to check the survey's structure, clarity, flow of information, and length. Feedback from the pilot led to minor corrections. Ethical approval was obtained before conducting the survey. The survey package included a study information sheet, a consent form, and a confidentiality statement to assure respondents that their data would be kept confidential. Contact details for the corresponding researcher were also provided. The survey was open for two months, from 1st April to 30th June 2024.

### 3.3. Methods of Data Analysis

The data retrieved were analyzed using both descriptive and inferential statistics. The analysis included the following steps:

1. **Descriptive statistics:** The frequencies and percentages were calculated to summarize respondents' background information. Mean scores and standard deviations were computed for the 25 barriers facing women during the transition from higher education to empowerment (based on gender), current study status, and province of respondents (i.e., Azad Kashmir, Sindh, Federal Territory, Gilgit Baltistan, Punjab, Balochistan, and KPK) to determine their perceived significance. In addition, cross-tabulations were performed to explore the relationships between variables, such as the years of professional experience and current study status, as well as the position and highest education qualification.
2. **Normality testing:** the Shapiro–Wilk test was conducted to assess the normality of the dataset, guiding the choice between parametric and non-parametric tests (see [Corder and Foreman 2014](#)).
3. **Inferential Statistics:** the Mann–Whitney U test was used to determine the significant difference between two groups (i.e., gender and current study status), while the Kruskal–Wallis H test was adopted for three groups or more (provinces or respondents). Following this, a post hoc test was conducted using pairwise Mann–Whitney tests and applying Bonferroni adjustment to control Type 1 errors ([Cohen 1988](#)) to determine the main group (i.e., province) where the significant difference occurred ([Olawumi and Chan 2020](#)).

## 4. Results of Analysis

### 4.1. Background Profile of Respondents

Table 1 shows the background profile of the 399 respondents of this study. Responses were received from respondents located in various provinces/regions in Pakistan, such as Azad Kashmir (9.0%), Federal Territory (12%), Punjab (48.4%), Balochistan (9.0%), KPK (9.8%), Gilgit Baltistan (7.0%), and Sindh (4.8%). Most respondents were female (83.2%), with males representing 16.8%. Most respondents were aged 20 to 25 (63.4%), and the age group 41 to 50 was least engaged (5.5%). The highest level of education of the respondents included vocational qualifications (1.5%), diploma (0.5%), bachelor's degree (54.6%), master's degree (28.6%), doctoral degree (7.5%), and other qualifications (7.3%). Over 50% of the respondents did not have working experience, 28.8% had 0 to 5 years of working experience, and a small number had more than 20 years of working experience in their chosen profession. Of the respondents, 36.1% were unemployed; the remaining respondents were students (16.3%), teachers (3.0%), lecturers (5.8%), junior staff (22.1%), senior staff (12.8%), main leads (3.8%), or housewives (0.3%).

**Table 1.** Background information of respondents.

Background Information	Categories	Frequency	Percentage
Region/Province	Azad Kashmir	36	9.0
	Federal Territory	48	12.0
	Punjab	193	48.4
	Balochistan	36	9.0
	KPK (Khyber Pakhtunkhwa)	39	9.8
	Gilgit Baltistan	28	7.0
	Sindh	19	4.8
Gender	Male	67	16.8
	Female	332	83.2
Age	Less than 20 years	33	8.3
	20–25 years	253	63.4
	26–30 years	40	10.0
	31–40 years	51	12.8
	41–50 years	22	5.5
Highest education	Vocational qualification	6	1.5
	Diploma	2	0.5
	Bachelor	218	54.6
	Master	114	28.6
	Doctoral	30	7.5
	Others	29	7.3
Currently studying	Yes	317	79.4
	No	82	20.6
Working experience	No working experience	210	52.6
	0–5 years	115	28.8
	6–10 years	30	7.5
	11–15 years	23	5.8
	16–20 years	11	2.8
	Above 20 years	10	2.5
Position	Unemployed	144	36.1
	Student	65	16.3
	Teacher	12	3.0
	Lecturer	23	5.8
	Junior staff	88	22.1
	Senior staff	51	12.8
	Management	15	3.8
	Housewife	1	0.3

#### 4.2. Cross-Tabulation Analysis of Respondent Profiles

A cross-tabulation analysis was conducted to determine the profile of respondents with no work experience and/or who were not studying; Table 2 shows that this amounted to only 10 respondents. Interestingly, 50.13% of the respondents (N = 200) were without work experience but were presently studying, and as the number of years of working experience increased, the number of respondents studying decreased. This indicates that lifelong learning and furthering education—to stay abreast of the latest innovations and work practices—was not a priority for professionals as they advanced in their careers.



**Table 2.** Cross-tabulation of years of professional experience and study.

Years of Professional Experience	Currently Studying?		Total
	Yes	No	
No working experience	200	10	210
0–5 years	78	37	115
6–10 years	21	9	30
11–15 years	11	12	23
16–20 years	5	6	11
Above 20 years	2	8	10
Total	317	82	399

To further probe into the profile of respondents, a cross-tabulation analysis between years of working experience and position (role) was undertaken (see Table 3). The analysis revealed that 56 respondents had neither working experience nor employment when this survey was conducted. Interestingly, 26 respondents who were not employed had prior working experience of 0 to 5 years, while the categories of 6 to 10 years, 11 to 15 years, and above 20 years of working experience each had one unemployed respondent. It can be inferred that respondents who were without working experience but currently unemployed may have lost their jobs or quit to focus on further studies.

**Table 3.** Cross-tabulation of position and year of professional experience.

		Years of Working Experience					Total	
		None	0–5 yrs	6–10 yrs	11–15 yrs	16–20 yrs		Above 20 yrs
Position	Unemployed	115	26	1	1	0	1	144
	Student	56	8	1	0	0	0	65
	Teachers	0	9	2	1	0	0	12
	Lecturer	0	16	6	1	0	0	23
	Junior staff	29	37	9	8	3	2	88
	Senior staff	9	12	8	9	6	7	51
	Management	0	7	3	3	2	0	15
	Housewife	1	0	0	0	0	0	1
Total	210	115	30	23	11	10	399	

Table 4 shows the relationships between the respondents' position and their highest education qualifications. Most unemployed respondents (N = 100) hold bachelor's degrees, followed by master's degrees (N = 27). One respondent who indicated that their position was a housewife also holds a bachelor's degree. However, it is inconclusive that family responsibilities may be why women who have secured professional careers have such a low response rate in this category. It is important to note that the overall profile of respondents was generally limited. Of the students, 46 held bachelor's degrees and were possibly studying for a master's degree, while 11 respondents in the student group had master's degrees when conducting the survey.

#### 4.3. Rating of Barriers Facing Women during the Transition from Higher Education to Empowerment

Table 5 shows the results of the descriptive analysis of the barriers facing women during the transition from higher education to empowerment in Pakistan. No additional barriers were added. The respondents' gender also delineated the results to determine any disparity in gender perceptions. In contrast, the difference in the respondents' views regarding gender was determined using the Mann–Whitney U test.

**Table 4.** Cross-tabulation of position and highest education qualification.

		Highest Education Qualification						Total
		Voc.	Dip.	Bach.	Mast.	PhD	Others	
Position	Unemployed	2	1	100	27	2	12	144
	Student	2	0	46	11	0	6	65
	Teacher	1	0	3	6	2	0	12
	Lecturer	0	0	2	15	5	1	23
	Junior staff	1	1	46	24	9	7	88
	Senior staff	0	0	16	33	9	3	51
	Management	0	0	4	8	3	0	15
	Housewife	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
Total		6	2	218	114	30	29	399

Across the classifications of the barriers, “educated parents advocate higher education and professional careers for their daughters”, with a mean score of 4.29 ranked highest. Both “time constraints due to domestic responsibilities often lead to the double burden on females to prevent them from higher education/professional career” and “early/child/forced marriages lead to lack of education for females” have the same mean score of 4.05, but a standard deviation of 0.86 and 0.97, respectively. This is followed by “work-life conflict (women are expected to construct a balance between family and profession, which leads to a double burden of household, work, and childbearing/rearing)”, with a mean score of 4.04. At the same time, “I believe that females should not engage in higher education because their role should focus on the family”, with a mean value of 2.65, is the least based on the rating of all the respondents.

A similar opinion is observed in this study’s rating of the female and male groups. “Educated parents advocate higher education and professional careers for their daughters” also ranked highest (Female,  $M = 4.31$ ; Male,  $M = 4.16$ ). “Time constraints due to domestic responsibilities often leads to the double burden on females to prevent them from higher education/professional career” has a mean value of 4.07, while “work-life conflict (women are expected to construct a balance between family and profession, which leads to a double burden of household, work, and childbearing/rearing)” has a mean score of 4.05 and 4.00 from female and male respondents, respectively. Although the female respondents opined that “early/child/forced marriages lead to lack of education for females” is a significant barrier, with a mean value of 4.08, the male respondents rated it as 3.88. Interestingly, both females and males rated “I believe that females should not engage in higher education because their role should focus on the family” as the least barrier facing women during the transition from higher education to empowerment in Pakistan.

The results of the Mann–Whitney U test show that significant differences occurred in four barriers facing women during the transition from higher education to empowerment in Pakistan. The barriers include “I believe that females should not engage in higher education because their role should focus on the family” with a significant value of 0.030, “educated parents advocate higher education and professional careers for their daughters” (Sig. = 0.041), “regular armed conflicts are what hinders women’s mobility” (Sig. = 0.040), and “Marital status of women impacts the level of harassment they are likely to experience (single women face more harassment than married women)” with a significantly different value of 0.008.

**Table 5.** Barriers facing women during the transition from higher education to empowerment in Pakistan based on the gender of respondents.

Classification	Description	Overall		Female		Male		M-W Sig
		Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.	
Family-related issues	I believe that females should not engage in higher education because their role should focus on the family	2.65	1.42	2.59	1.42	2.99	1.41	0.030
	Educated parents advocate higher education and professional careers for their daughters	4.29	0.83	4.31	0.85	4.16	0.73	0.041
	Time constraints due to domestic responsibilities often lead to a double burden on females to prevent them from higher education/professional career	4.05	0.86	4.07	0.85	3.94	0.92	0.338
	Parents often have different professional and life aspirations for their daughters and sons	3.84	1.00	3.82	1.00	3.97	1.03	0.152
Sociocultural values	A male-dominated power structure—whereby privilege is held and maintained by men in both society and social relationships—is the norm in my community	3.78	0.92	3.78	0.89	3.82	1.06	0.292
	Conservative cultural norms and political factors hinder the academic and professional journey of females	3.95	0.91	3.99	0.86	3.79	1.09	0.340
	Females often face a lack of access to education, health, and welfare	3.94	0.90	3.95	0.88	3.90	0.96	0.830
	Early/child/forced marriages lead to a lack of education for females	4.05	0.97	4.08	0.95	3.88	1.07	0.178
Gendered Norms	Women often face gender differences in education, enrollment, and workplace settings	3.83	0.98	3.89	0.93	3.58	1.16	0.063
	In my community/social/professional workplace circle, female education is considered a low priority as it does not uplift the family economically	3.36	1.16	3.38	1.13	3.25	1.28	0.633
	There are fewer or less diverse job options available for women	3.72	0.99	3.76	0.96	3.55	1.15	0.277
	In my community/social/professional workplace circle, there is a gendered perception of leadership	3.60	1.09	3.60	1.05	3.60	1.30	0.530
Economic factors	Poverty (financial barriers to affording education) is what restricts the advancement of education for women	3.92	0.92	3.95	0.87	3.76	1.10	0.274
	In my community/social/professional workplace circle, there is selective enforcement of policies in the context of women’s education and professional career growth	3.60	0.96	3.63	0.94	3.46	1.05	0.241
	There is unequal pay among men and women	3.47	1.12	3.51	1.10	3.31	1.20	0.308
	There is a general lack of job security for women	3.72	1.07	3.75	1.04	3.58	1.17	0.319
Freedom and mobility	Regular armed conflicts are what hinders women’s mobility	3.77	0.89	3.82	0.83	3.51	1.12	0.040
	Cultural and religious restrictions are what hinders women’s mobility	3.76	0.89	3.78	0.82	3.64	1.15	0.625
	There is an insufficient supply of educational institutes within accessible distance for women	3.69	0.94	3.70	0.91	3.67	1.06	0.868
	Work-life conflict (women are expected to construct a balance between family and profession, which leads to a double burden of household, work, and childbearing/rearing)	4.04	0.92	4.05	0.91	4.00	1.02	0.937

Table 5. Cont.

Classification	Description	Overall		Female		Male		M-W Sig
		Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.	
Violence and harassment	In my community/social/professional workplace circle, there is often domestic violence against women	3.64	1.10	3.61	1.09	3.75	1.16	0.234
	In my community/social/professional workplace circle, there is often sexual harassment/abuse against women.	3.70	1.08	3.67	1.08	3.84	1.05	0.219
	There is a lack of implementation of sexual harassment policies in education or professional workplace settings	3.87	0.94	3.87	0.93	3.88	1.02	0.669
	Women often face humiliation in the workplace from intimidating supervisors	3.64	0.98	3.63	0.98	3.67	0.99	0.744
	Marital status of women impacts the level of harassment they are likely to experience (single women face more harassment than married women)	3.75	1.00	3.73	1.00	3.45	0.94	0.008

Note: M-W = Mann-Whitney test.

Table 6 below shows the results of the descriptive analysis, namely, the mean score and standard deviation of the barriers facing women during the transition from higher education to empowerment in Pakistan based on their current studying status. The significant difference in the respondents' opinions in the two groups was also determined using the Mann–Whitney U test. In both groups of respondents currently studying and not currently studying, “educated parents advocate higher education and professional careers for their daughters” ranked highest with mean scores of 4.28 and 4.32, respectively. “Time constraints due to domestic responsibilities often leads to the double burden on females to prevent them from higher education/professional career” has mean scores of 4.04 and 4.06, respectively. “Early/child/forced marriages lead to lack of education for females” has mean scores of 4.03 and 4.11, respectively. This is followed by “work-life conflict (women are expected to construct a balance between family and profession, which leads to a double burden of household, work, and childbearing/rearing)” with mean scores of 4.03 and 4.11 in the two groups, while “I believe that females should not engage in higher education because their role should focus on the family” with mean values of 2.72 and 2.41, respectively, is the least based on the rating of the respondents in the two groups.

It is important to note that the Mann–Whitney U test results reveal a significant difference in only one of twenty-five barriers facing women during the transition from higher education to empowerment in Pakistan (see Table 6). The barriers include “In my community/social/professional workplace circle, there is often domestic violence against women”, with a significantly different value of 0.002. This implies that respondents studying and those not currently studying have the same views on the remaining twenty-four barriers facing women during the transition from higher education to empowerment in Pakistan in this study.

Table 7 reveals respondents' mean scores across various regions/provinces in Pakistan on women's barriers during the transition from higher education to empowerment. According to the rating of the Azad Kashmir-based respondents, both “educated parents advocate higher education and professional careers for their daughters” and “females often face a lack of access to education, health, and welfare” ranked highest, with a mean score of 4.25. In other results: “There is a lack of implementation of sexual harassment policies in education or professional workplace settings” ( $M = 4.22$ ), “work-life conflict (women are expected to construct a balance between family and profession, which leads to a double burden of household, work, and childbearing/rearing)” and “time constraints due to domestic responsibilities often leads to double burden on females to prevent them from higher education/professional career” have a mean score of 4.08, and “Poverty (financial barriers to afford education) is what restricts advancement of education for women”, has a mean score of 4.14. Both “there are fewer or less diverse job options available for women” and “conservative cultural norms and political factors hinder the academic and professional journey of females” have the same mean score of 4.19.

The respondents located in Sindh rated “educated parents advocate higher education and professional careers for their daughters” and “poverty (financial barriers to afford education) is what restricts advancement of education for women” highest, with a mean score of 4.11. Meanwhile, three barriers, namely “time constraints due to domestic responsibilities often leads to double burden on females to prevent them from higher education/professional career”, “early/child/forced marriages lead to lack of education for females”, and “women often face gender differences in education, enrollment, and workplace settings” have the same mean score of 4.05. The least ranked barrier in this group is “I believe that females should not engage in higher education because their role should focus on the family”, with a mean value of 2.37.

**Table 6.** Barriers facing women during the transition from higher education to empowerment in Pakistan based on current study status.

Classification	Description	Studying		Not Studying		M-W Sig
		Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.	
Family-related issues	I believe that females should not engage in higher education because their role should focus on the family	2.72	1.43	2.41	1.38	0.086
	Educated parents advocate higher education and professional careers for their daughters	4.28	0.83	4.32	0.87	0.484
	Time constraints due to domestic responsibilities often lead to a double burden on females to prevent them from higher education/professional career	4.04	0.84	4.06	0.96	0.449
	Parents often have different professional and life aspirations for their daughters and sons	3.88	0.99	3.71	1.05	0.197
Sociocultural values	A male-dominated power structure—whereby privilege is held and maintained by men in both society and social relationships—is the norm in my community	3.78	0.88	3.82	1.06	0.380
	Conservative cultural norms and political factors hinder the academic and professional journey of females	3.95	0.87	3.96	1.04	0.520
	Females often face a lack of access to education, health, and welfare	3.99	0.85	3.76	1.05	0.096
	Early/child/forced marriages lead to a lack of education for females	4.03	1.01	4.11	0.82	0.898
Gendered Norms	Women often face gender differences in education, enrollment, and workplace settings	3.84	0.96	3.80	1.05	0.982
	In my community/social/professional workplace circle, female education is considered a low priority as it does not uplift the family economically	3.42	1.13	3.13	1.23	0.062
	There are fewer or less diverse job options available for women	3.73	0.96	3.71	1.13	0.831
	In my community/social/professional workplace circle, there is a gendered perception of leadership	3.61	1.06	3.54	1.22	0.797
Economic factors	Poverty (financial barriers to affording education) is what restricts the advancement of education for women	3.92	0.90	3.94	1.00	0.555
	In my community/social/professional workplace circle, there is selective enforcement of policies in the context of women’s education and professional career growth	3.63	0.93	3.48	1.07	0.316
	There is unequal pay among men and women	3.51	1.10	3.34	1.19	0.286
	There is a general lack of job security for women	3.73	1.03	3.70	1.21	0.787
Freedom and mobility	Regular armed conflicts are what hinders women’s mobility	3.77	0.88	3.77	0.97	0.755
	Cultural and religious restrictions are what hinders women’s mobility	3.77	0.86	3.71	1.00	0.932
	There is an insufficient supply of educational institutes within accessible distance for women	3.72	0.92	3.59	0.99	0.372
	Work-life conflict (women are expected to construct a balance between family and profession, which leads to a double burden of household, work, and childbearing/rearing)	4.03	0.92	4.10	0.92	0.430



**Table 6.** *Cont.*

Classification	Description	Studying		Not Studying		M-W Sig
		Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.	
Violence and harassment	In my community/social/professional workplace circle, there is often domestic violence against women	3.74	1.03	3.26	1.26	0.002
	In my community/social/professional workplace circle, there is often sexual harassment/abuse against women.	3.75	1.03	3.48	1.22	0.109
	There is a lack of implementation of sexual harassment policies in education or professional workplace settings	3.87	0.94	3.90	0.98	0.602
	Women often face humiliation at the workplace from intimidating supervisors	3.62	0.98	3.70	1.01	0.487
	Marital status of women impacts the level of harassment they are likely to experience (single women face more harassment than married women)	3.66	1.00	3.78	0.99	0.252

Note: M-W = Mann-Whitney test.

**Table 7.** Barriers facing women during the transition from higher education to empowerment in Pakistan based on region/province.

Classification	Description	Baloc	Az. K	Sindh	Fed. T	Gil. B	Punj.	KPK	K-W (Sig)
		Mean	Mean	Mean	Mean	Mean	Mean	Mean	
Family-related issues	I believe that females should not engage in higher education because their role should focus on the family	2.69	2.94	2.37	2.71	3.04	2.63	2.28	0.307
	Educated parents advocate higher education and professional careers for their daughters	4.17	4.25	4.11	4.15	4.25	4.32	4.54	0.551
	Time constraints due to domestic responsibilities often lead to a double burden on females to prevent them from higher education/professional career	3.92	4.08	4.05	4.10	3.96	4.07	4.00	0.902
	Parents often have different professional and life aspirations for their daughters and sons	3.92	3.89	3.68	3.81	3.79	3.87	3.74	0.911
Sociocultural values	A male-dominated power structure—whereby privilege is held and maintained by men in both society and social relationships—is the norm in my community	3.69	4.00	3.47	3.83	3.57	3.82	3.72	0.298
	Conservative cultural norms and political factors hinder the academic and professional journey of females	4.08	4.19	3.95	3.88	3.89	3.95	3.79	0.461
	Females often face a lack of access to education, health, and welfare	4.00	4.25	3.68	3.88	3.89	3.92	3.95	0.231
	Early/child/forced marriages lead to a lack of education for females	4.05	4.00	4.05	4.06	3.86	4.05	4.13	0.854

Table 7. Cont.

Classification	Description	Baloc	Az. K	Sindh	Fed. T	Gil. B	Punj.	KPK	K-W (Sig)
		Mean	Mean	Mean	Mean	Mean	Mean	Mean	
Gendered Norms	Women often face gender differences in education, enrollment, and workplace settings	3.92	3.97	4.05	3.90	3.71	3.75	3.95	0.556
	In my community/social/professional workplace circle, female education is considered a low priority as it does not uplift the family economically	3.31	3.69	3.32	3.42	3.43	3.27	3.44	0.419
	There are fewer or less diverse job options available for women	3.81	4.19	3.84	3.75	3.75	3.65	3.49	0.041
	In my community/social/professional workplace circle, there is a gendered perception of leadership	3.36	3.72	3.58	3.71	3.57	3.52	3.95	0.147
Economic factors	Poverty (financial barriers to affording education) is what restricts the advancement of education for women	3.94	4.14	4.11	3.85	3.93	3.91	3.77	0.826
	In my community/social/professional workplace circle, there is selective enforcement of policies in the context of women's education and professional career growth	3.47	3.83	3.63	3.67	3.50	3.60	3.49	0.683
	There is unequal pay among men and women	3.22	3.69	3.42	3.58	3.14	3.52	3.38	0.381
	There is a general lack of job security for women	3.56	3.83	3.68	3.85	3.61	3.73	3.69	0.884
Freedom and mobility	Regular armed conflicts are what hinders women's mobility	3.67	3.72	3.58	3.98	3.89	3.75	3.77	0.797
	Cultural and religious restrictions are what hinders women's mobility	3.64	3.86	3.63	3.83	3.68	3.80	3.59	0.578
	There is an insufficient supply of educational institutes within accessible distance for women	3.36	3.78	3.74	3.60	3.79	3.75	3.69	0.339
	Work-life conflict (women are expected to construct a balance between family and profession, which leads to a double burden of household, work, and childbearing/rearing)	3.89	4.08	3.74	4.04	4.04	4.06	4.18	0.876
Violence and harassment	In my community/social/professional workplace circle, there is often domestic violence against women	3.56	3.64	3.37	3.77	3.86	3.64	3.51	0.620
	In my community/social/professional workplace circle, there is often sexual harassment/abuse against women.	3.72	3.78	3.32	3.96	3.82	3.69	3.38	0.212
	There is a lack of implementation of sexual harassment policies in education or professional workplace settings	3.81	4.22	3.79	4.04	3.93	3.83	3.64	0.227
	Women often face humiliation at the workplace from intimidating supervisors	3.50	3.72	3.68	3.75	3.71	3.62	3.56	0.776
	Marital status of women impacts the level of harassment they are likely to experience (single women face more harassment than married women)	3.67	3.81	3.63	3.79	3.71	3.68	3.46	0.880

Note: Az. K = Azad Kashmir, Fed. T. = Federal territory, Gil. B. = Gilgit Baltistan, Punj. = Punjab, Balo. = Balochistan, K-W = Kruskal–Wallis test.

Upon analyzing the data descriptively, it was observed that respondents from all provinces had similar views on the barriers faced by women during the transition from higher education to empowerment. However, the Kruskal–Wallis H test revealed a significant difference in respondents’ opinions in the seven groups. Notably, the analysis indicated a significant difference in only one barrier, “there are fewer or less diverse job options available for women”, with a value of 0.041. It is worth noting that all respondents from the seven provinces shared similar perspectives on the remaining barriers women face during their transition from higher education to empowerment in Pakistan.

4.4. Post Hoc Analysis

Table 8 shows the post hoc test results and the Bonferroni adjustment applied to control for Type 1 errors on the barriers facing women during the transition from higher education to empowerment in Pakistan, where the Kruskal–Wallis H test indicated significant differences.

Table 8. Post hoc analysis of availability of fewer or less diverse job options available for women.

Sample 1–Sample 2	Test Statistic	Std. Error	Std. Test Statistic	Sig.	Adj. Sig.
KPK-Punjab	17.961	18.956	0.948	0.343	1.000
KPK-Gilgit Baltistan	−27.431	26.744	−1.026	0.305	1.000
KPK-Federal Territory	33.778	23.276	1.451	0.147	1.000
KPK-Sindh	−38.460	30.207	−1.273	0.203	1.000
KPK-Balochistan	44.386	24.955	1.779	0.075	1.000
KPK-Azad Kashmir	77.872	24.955	3.121	0.002	0.038
Punjab-Gilgit Baltistan	−9.471	21.835	−0.434	0.664	1.000
Punjab-Federal Territory	15.817	17.415	0.908	0.364	1.000
Punjab-Sindh	−20.499	25.961	−0.790	0.430	1.000
Punjab-Balochistan	−26.425	19.602	−1.348	0.178	1.000
Punjab-Azad Kashmir	59.911	19.602	3.056	0.002	0.047
Gilgit Baltistan-Federal Territory	6.347	25.675	0.247	0.805	1.000
Gilgit Baltistan-Sindh	−11.028	32.092	−0.344	0.731	1.000
Gilgit Baltistan-Balochistan	16.954	27.206	0.623	0.533	1.000
Gilgit Baltistan-Azad Kashmir	50.440	27.206	1.854	0.064	1.000
Federal Territory-Sindh	−4.681	29.265	−0.160	0.873	1.000
Federal Territory-Balochistan	−10.608	23.805	−0.446	0.656	1.000
Federal Territory-Azad Kashmir	44.094	23.805	1.852	0.064	1.000
Sindh-Balochistan	5.926	30.617	0.194	0.847	1.000
Sindh-Azad Kashmir	39.412	30.617	1.287	0.198	1.000
Balochistan-Azad Kashmir	33.486	25.449	1.316	0.188	1.000

Table 8 reveals that a significant difference in “there are fewer or less diverse job options available for women” occurred between respondents in KPK and Azad Kashmir with a *p*-value of 0.038, and a significant value of 0.047 was also recorded between the respondents in Punjab and Azad Kashmir. Azad Kashmir occurred at both points where significant values were recorded in the post hoc analysis. The urbanization and development of Azad Kashmir, along with sufficient job opportunities, made respondents in the area believe that there were not fewer or less diverse job opportunities available for women. In addition,

the presence of foreign organizations whose senior management may not have any bias towards employing women may also contribute to the findings of this study.

## 5. Discussion

The findings of this study, which delved into the barriers women face during the transition from higher education to empowerment in Pakistan, are of significant importance. The robust sample size and high response rate have shed light on the multifaceted challenges women encounter. The study has brought to the forefront various sociocultural, familial, and professional obstacles that hinder women's progress in higher education and subsequent empowerment.

### 5.1. Sociocultural and Familial Barriers

The findings indicate that sociocultural norms and familial expectations are pivotal in shaping women's educational and professional trajectories. Notably, the barrier "educated participants to advocate higher education and professional careers for their daughters" received the highest mean score (4.29), underscoring the critical influence of parental support on women's educational attainment. Despite these challenges, women have shown remarkable resilience, balancing their professional aspirations with domestic responsibilities. This is evident in the high mean scores for barriers such as "time constraints due to domestic responsibilities" (4.05) and "work-life conflict" (4.04). These results suggest that while parental support is crucial, the societal expectation for women to balance professional and household duties remains a substantial impediment to their empowerment.

### 5.2. Gender Differences in Perception of Barriers

The study's findings also highlight the need for targeted interventions. Female respondents consistently rated the barriers higher than their male counterparts, indicating a more acute awareness and experience of these challenges. This gender disparity underscores the necessity for interventions that specifically address the challenges faced by women and efforts to raise awareness among men about these issues.

### 5.3. Professional and Educational Barriers

Professional and educational barriers also emerged as significant factors. Over 50% of the respondents had no working experience, and a considerable proportion were unemployed. The cross-tabulation analysis revealed that most respondents without working experience were currently studying, suggesting a potential pathway where further education is seen as a means to overcome professional barriers. However, the barriers related to workplace gender norms and professional aspirations for women compared to men indicate ongoing challenges in achieving gender parity in professional settings.

### 5.4. Regional Variations

The study's analysis by province has revealed regional variations in the perception and impact of these barriers. Respondents from Punjab, the most represented province, indicated slightly different challenges than those from less represented regions like Sindh and Gilgit Baltistan. These regional disparities underscore the need for localized strategies to address women's barriers in other parts of Pakistan effectively.

### 5.5. Implications for Policy and Practice

The findings from this study have significant implications for policymakers, educators, and advocates working towards women's empowerment in Pakistan. The urgency of addressing these barriers is underscored by the fact that over 50% of the respondents had no working experience, and a considerable proportion were unemployed. Policies aimed at reducing domestic responsibilities for women, promoting gender-sensitive work environments, and supporting early education on gender equality can help mitigate some of the identified barriers. Furthermore, enhancing parental education and awareness about

the importance of higher education for daughters can have a positive ripple effect on women's empowerment.

One key policy recommendation is for educational institutions to actively promote gender-sensitive curricula that challenge and dismantle traditional stereotypes about women's roles. This policy should not only focus on revising the content of course materials but also include training sessions for educators, ensuring that teachers are aware of and advocate for gender equality in the classroom. By transforming both the content and delivery of education, institutions can play a significant role in shifting the perception of women's capabilities and potential in both academic and professional spaces. It is important to note that such curricula also benefit men by promoting a more inclusive and diverse learning environment, enhancing their understanding of gender issues, and fostering empathy. Educational reforms that address deeply embedded patriarchal structures and gender bias are crucial for creating an equitable society where women are empowered through education (Ali et al. 2021; Ahmad and Bhatti 2023).

In the workplace, addressing barriers related to work–life balance and domestic responsibilities is a collective responsibility. Policies that promote workplace equity, such as parental leave, flexible working hours, and affordable childcare services, require collaboration between governments and private-sector employers. These supports are vital in helping women navigate their dual roles in professional and domestic settings (Tanaka and Muzones 2016; Shah et al. 2020). By making these provisions standard, we can reduce the gender disparities that arise from societal expectations placed on women, demonstrating the power of collective action in achieving gender equality. Each of us, in our respective roles, can contribute to this larger movement (Waqar et al. 2021; Bishu and Headley 2020).

Legislative reforms are also crucial for creating safer, more equitable work environments. The enforcement of anti-discrimination and harassment policies in both workplaces and educational institutions must be prioritized. Strengthening existing laws and introducing stricter penalties for gender-based discrimination and harassment will serve as a deterrent and foster environments where women can thrive without fear (Hadi 2022). Involvement from government agencies and NGOs is necessary to monitor compliance and ensure these reforms are effectively implemented (Almaki et al. 2016).

Finally, community and family interventions are not just important; they are critical for long-term societal change. Policies should focus on shifting deeply rooted societal perceptions by engaging key influencers within local communities, including religious leaders, family members, and local authorities. Awareness campaigns advocating for women's rights and gender equality are essential in fostering cultural change (Sharif et al. 2024a). Additionally, family-oriented programs that encourage parents to support their daughters' education and professional ambitions can help to address the cultural barriers that often restrict women's opportunities. Collective involvement from these stakeholders is essential for sustained transformation, and it is a responsibility we all share (Abbasi et al. 2019).

## 6. Conclusions

In conclusion, this study provides a comprehensive overview of the barriers Pakistani women experience during the transition from higher education to empowerment. The insights gained underscore the complex interplay of sociocultural, familial, and professional factors that must be addressed to foster an environment conducive to women's empowerment. While these barriers are significant, they are not insurmountable. A more equitable society can be achieved with the right interventions and policies. These discussions should serve as a foundation for developing strategies and policies to support women in overcoming these barriers and achieving their full potential in both educational and professional domains. Future research should continue to explore these dynamics, mainly focusing on interventions that can effectively reduce these barriers and promote gender equality in education and professional spheres. Lessons learnt can be transferable to other countries, particularly those that share similar cultural values.

Finally, it is important to note that this study has some important limitations. First, since the research is focused specifically on Pakistan, the findings may not fully apply to other cultural or economic settings where gender roles and societal norms may vary. Moreover, the study does not explore how factors like socio-economic status, ethnicity, or rural–urban differences might shape women’s experiences. Additionally, while the study highlights various barriers, it does not evaluate the effectiveness of current policies or interventions, which makes it less practical for those looking to implement solutions.

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